

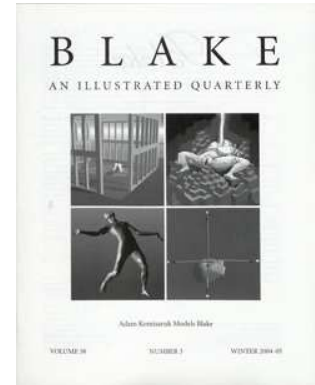
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY
BLAKE

R E V I E W

Alexander S. Gourlay, ed., *Prophetic Character:
Essays on William Blake in Honor of John E.
Grant*

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Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 38, Issue 3, Winter 2004/2005, pp.
107-109



While reading the book, I kept thinking of two passages in *The Marriage*. One is "How do you know but ev'ry Bird that cuts the airy way, / Is an immense world of delight, clos'd by your senses five?" (pl. 7). How do we know, for example, that the immense world of delight that artistic imaginings can give us now is not a prototype of what we might experience directly with improved senses? The other is the ambiguously worded description of the last chamber of the printing house of Hell, in which the finished works of art "were reciev'd by Men who occupied the sixth chamber, and took the forms of books & were arranged in libraries" (pl. 15). The Men receive the books, but they also take the forms of books. Humans are like texts here not in that both have orifices and interiors but in that ideally our lives are shaped by our own imaginations and creative efforts, as texts are. Giving us larger and more numerous senses, epitomizing a creativity that we do not yet have in our individual and communal lives, art for Blake both anticipates and brings about the eternal body, and "the artist is an inhabitant of that happy country," Eden (*A Descriptive Catalogue*, E 533).

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Alexander S. Gourlay, ed. *Prophetic Character: Essays on William Blake in Honor of John E. Grant*. Locust Hill Literary Studies, No. 33. West Cornwall, CT: Locust Hill Press, 2002. xxiii + 396pp. 67 illus. \$60.00, hardcover.

Reviewed by Joseph Wittreich

Since 1960, William Blake has undergone rehabilitation and, tardily, canonization, only to be exiled yet again to the wilderness. Meanwhile, Blake criticism, which initially seemed at a crossroads, has moved into crisis. Yet with each shift, and at every juncture, John E. Grant has been both a striking and a salutary presence—often as corrector but, more important, as collaborator who, with David V. Erdman, produced *Blake's Visionary Forms Dramatic* (1970) and, with Mary Lynn Johnson, coedited *Blake's Poetry and Designs: A Norton Critical Edition* (1979). A year later, the Clarendon Press issued its monumental *William Blake's Designs for Edward Young's "Night Thoughts"* (1980) under the editorship of Erdman and Grant, here joined by Edward J. Rose and Michael J. Tolley. Grant's first two articles (not on Blake) were co-authored, as if in anticipation of the important essays on Blake that he wrote jointly with Robert E. Brown, Mary Lynn Johnson, and Alexander S. Gourlay, the editor of the festschrift here under review. An earlier volume, with essays by various hands, *Critical Paths: Blake and the Argument of Method* (1987), was dedicated to Grant. Gourlay's book, poignantly introduced, expertly edited, and amazingly particularized, is presented as a tribute to—and token of—Grant's achievement.

As Mary Lynn Johnson concludes her magisterial survey of modern Blake criticism, she observes that "[i]f a major shift is occurring in Blake studies, as it seems to be, it does not pivot on any one new work, and no new paradigm is in

evidence."¹ Nearly twenty years later, the picture has clarified. A new phase of Blake criticism was inaugurated by the efforts of those like Grant who, crossing boundaries, produced paradigms for interdisciplinary study and, intermixing methodologies, underscored the fact that a tangle of ways does not hide the right path but is the right path. This founding principle of a new Blake criticism is threaded through *Prophetic Character*, yet another example of Grant as an energizing force in Blake criticism. Collectively, its essays make this point—in thunder. At their very best, they also share with Grant's work "an instinct for the capillaries."² Many of these essays are embellishments, directly or obliquely, of Grant's preoccupation with the emergence and education of the prophetic character in his different aspects—historical, legendary, or mythic—and of Blake's evolving critique of such characters, whether in bracing juxtapositions like Swedenborg and Milton, or Newton and Milton, or through acute probings of mythic protagonists like Orc and Los. The thrust of Blake's illuminated writings, however much anchored in history, is toward prophecy: it is poetry written in the future tense and painting with a forward gaze, each imbued with an acute sense of apocalyptic crisis.

Two essays in this volume, particularly, illustrate the impulse, evident throughout the collection, to follow in Grant's footsteps. After mapping the range and nuance of recent criticism, Michael Ferber, "In Defense of Clods," allows that he himself is unable to "shake the conviction that the poem, or the poem's speaker, endorses the Clod as right, and that the preponderance of relevant poems both within the *Songs* and outside it endorse the Clod's point of view." "The very features of the poem one can cite against the Clod," Ferber concludes, "are snares placed in our way to tempt us from the path of simplicity" (54). If "The Pebble and the Clod," with its warring perspectives, is both an epitome of the dialectic at play within and between poems in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, as well as what Ferber calls "a portal into Blake" (60), inflections shift, strikingly so, as we are lured into the perilous paths of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. If it turns the tables on the essay it succeeds, Everett C. Frost's "The Education of the Prophetic Character" not only dovetails with Grant's earlier work but is also an impressive exfoliation of it. Frost's *Marriage* is "an autobiographic Bildungsroman of the prophet as a young man" (72). Not itself "a prophecy but the primer for one" (75), this prose-poem, which Frost describes as "a stunning dramatic narrative of enormous complexity,

subtlety, and force" (72), demonstrates that "Consciousness sharpens perception, and not the other way around" (81).

The best essays in this festschrift, two of them giving it a frame, follow Grant in redirecting Blake criticism from the matter of Blake and tradition to the interrelated questions of Blake and which traditions? In which of their manifestations? Stephen C. Behrendt, in the lead essay, makes the point powerfully: "Blake was less interested in merely preserving than in transforming (and frequently in discrediting or subverting) traditional materials and formulations" (8), Behrendt then illustrating his point by examining in connection with different versions of Blake's *Pestilence* the extent to which Blake, along with William Hayley, was engaged "in transforming traditional images and aesthetics into a new and contemporary cultural context" (8). Behrendt's own interest in the millenarian impulse in Blake's art is later highlighted, first, by G. A. Rosso who, in the attention he gives to the figure of Rahab in its biblical contexts, claims for Blake a reading of Scriptures "unique" to this poet, but also "based on a profound grasp of the turning points of biblical history" (292). With the evolving character of Rahab, Blake assimilates from the Epistle to the Hebrews, according to Rosso, its "typology of crucifixion-atonement" (302) only then to subject Hebrews "to critique by reading it against the Gospel accounts of crucifixion or, more accurately, against his own apocalyptic approach to the Gospel narratives" (303).

In his brilliantly climactic essay, Richard J. Squibbs examines "the vexed relationship between stargazing and biblical prophecy in English history," especially in terms of "the aura of determinism surrounding astrological prophecy" (352). Documenting his thesis through the example of Blake's *Europe*, Squibbs concludes that, by its end, "Blake symbolically explodes astrology's cyclical consciousness and depicts the typological emergence of the English people from a benighted, star-bound perception of history" (367). By reporting how Blake so often writes against the grain of the traditions he invokes, Squibbs allows us to grasp, simultaneously, how popular astrology and astronomical discourse molded Blake's vision and how Blake then "forged his prophetic stance in opposition to largely-forgotten, anti-revolutionary and conservative popular discourses as well" (383).

If such an argument does not nullify, it nevertheless puts a check on the perhaps overly easy proposition of the essay it succeeds, that "kabbalistic prototypes provided the basis for the intricate numerological pattern underlying the physical structure of *Jerusalem's* 100 plates" (Sheila Spector, 332), as well as his alteration of the original plans for this poem, tampering with the order of its plates, and revision, or failure to amend, crucial passages in this epic prophecy (347-48). Indeed, these provocative assertions beg to be tested against the contrary viewpoint that kabbalistic paradigms are an aspect of the poem's mathematical, not living, form. As does Spector, Morton D. Paley ventures into a hitherto neglected area of Blake criticism as, conjecturing that Blake never would

1. See Mary Lynn Johnson, "William Blake," in *The English Romantic Poets: A Review of Research and Criticism*, ed. Frank Jordan, 4th ed. (New York: MLA, 1985) 249. See also the fine remarks by Dan Miller, "Introduction," in *Critical Paths: Blake and the Argument of Method*, ed. Dan Miller, Mark Bracher, and Donald Ault (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1987) 1-18, especially 3.

2. Alexander S. Gourlay borrows this phrase from William Kuper-Smith, longtime editor of *Philological Quarterly*; see Gourlay, "Foreward," in *Prophetic Character* xv.

have purchased Thornton's translation of the Lord's prayer, he concludes of this "bloated translation set in an equally bloated farrago of opinions and quotations" (284) that, "written for tiny audiences of readers in the Blake-Linnell circle," the annotations are "uncompromising, sometimes fiercely so," in their presentation of Blake's later—and Gnostic—ideas (284).

Grant's imprint is, likewise, evident in those essays that, like Paley's, dwell on minute particulars. Take, for example, Catherine L. McClenahan's reflections on Erin who, alone among the female characters in *Jerusalem*, "is a thoughtful, analytical, critical, imaginative, creative, and above all effectively active participant in the 'public' domain of the work of Los and his allies" (157). Or witness Jennifer Davis Michael's remarks on "Blake's symbolic use of feet, ... intrinsic to his artistic project, fusing spiritual, sexual, and poetic acts into a single member" (206). Where Grant's imprint is most conspicuous, however, is in the essays by J. M. Q. Davies, Jon Mee, and Peter Otto that, as exfoliations of Grant's work on Young's *Night Thoughts*, are dedicated to sharpening perceptions and enlarging horizons.

In a richly suggestive essay, which calibrates yet again "the distance between orthodox Christianity and Blake's Christian humanism" (33), J. M. Q. Davies discovers within Blake's "imaginative freedom" (27) from Young's poem a critique no less applicable to Young than to Milton. Hence, Blake's *Night Thoughts* series, according to Davies, "provide[s] very specific clues to the direction of Blake's thought in the Milton illustrations" (30), whether it be through the bold suggestion that Adam tempts Eve (32-36) rather than the other way around (Grant trumps Davies in this argument,³ I think) or in Blake's even bolder departure from tradition (see design NT 276) where "the figure being tempted is not another Eve or Adam but an angel" (39). Yet, it is in the coda to his essay that Davies scores his strongest points by observing the play between the conventionality of the representation of Samson and the deviational character of the accompanying iconography where, with one eye open and in upward gaze, Samson is figured alone—with no victims—as if to say that (at least in this depiction) Samson is portrayed as one of Blake's visionary company (46-49). In a turn of the lens, Peter Otto looks at the *Night Thoughts* illustrations, woven inextricably into the verbal and visual fabric of *The Four Zoas*, for what (as an interpreting context) those illustrations tell us about Blake's poem. Almost as a supplement to Davies's essay, Otto observes that "the two volumes of Blake's watercolor designs for *Night Thoughts* have as their frontispieces representations of the resurrection; but the series as a whole closes with Samson

3. It seems that the fruit Adam holds in his right hand in figure 1 (32) is the same as Eve holds in the same hand in figure 2 (34), Blake thereby reinforcing the idea that Adam, not Satan, is the bearer of the fruit and source of the temptation; that if Satan falls self-tempted, Eve falls tempted by another.

pulling down the pillars of the temple" (260), underscoring (as *Milton* and *Jerusalem* will later do) the intimate relationship between renovation and apocalypse.

Of the three essays centered in Blake's *Night Thoughts* illustrations, the most dashing of them is by Jon Mee. Against the usual proposition that these illustrations reveal "a personal struggle to wrest visionary truth from a turgid eighteenth-century forebear," Mee pits his own formidable understanding of "Blake's illustrations in the context of the different ways in which Young's text circulated in the print culture of the time" (171, 172) and of the extent to which "politics and prophecy are fundamentally intertwined in his reading of Young's text" (190). Mee's essay goes a long way toward explaining why so few of Blake's 537 illustrations were actually published (just 43) by suggesting that Richard Edwards, commissioner of these illustrations, sought to prevent the seepage of "a radical millenarianism" from a poem Edwards "thought of as strengthening the moral fiber of the nation" (200). Blake's triumph was to leave to future generations what we should not willingly let die: what Benjamin Haydon would call "the poetry of the rainbow."⁴ Correspondingly, Grant's achievement, over nearly half a century, is, like Blake's, always to have kept faith in time of trouble and, even when his eye is on the tragedy of history, to think beyond it into a new future. In the eloquent testimony of all these essays, like the poet in which he has invested nearly half a century of dazzling scholarship, Grant is a mental prince who, as the provocation for this remarkable gathering of essays, places yet another plank in the floor of what one hopes will eventually become a newly energized Blake criticism.

4. Quoted from Eric George, *The Life and Death of Benjamin Haydon 1786-1846* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1948) 116.

The Program of the International Blake Conference *Blake in the Orient* and the Catalogue of a Concurrent Exhibition *The Reception of Blake in Japan*. The Blake Conference Committee: Kyoto, Japan, 2003. Program 46 pp.; catalogue ii + 93pp. ¥7,000.

Reviewed by Yoko Ima-Izumi

The international conference *Blake in the Orient* took place in Kyoto, Japan, during the beautiful autumn of 2003; a concurrent exhibition was also held displaying the earliest publications on Blake by Japanese writers, painters, and schol-